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Suspect Held in Scheme to Sell Secrets to Russians

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LOS ANGELES, Dec. 18 — A 40-year-old engineer for the Northrop Corporation was arrested today on charges that he stole top-secret "stealth" airplane technology and tried to sell it to the Soviet Union.

Attorney General William French Smith announced the arrest by the Federal Bureau of Investigation at a news conference in Washington. Mr. Smith said the "disclosure of these documents would have caused irreparable damage to the national security of the United States," indicating that the purported scheme had been aborted before any documents reached Soviet hands.

The experimental program, called "low-observable technology" in military parlance and started under the Carter Administration, is aimed at developing forms of aircraft that cannot be detected by enemy radar. Successful development of such a craft would render obsolete any adversary's air defense system based on radar or other sensing devices. The United States has invested billions in at least two different programs, one of which is based at Northrop.

Suspect Identified

The arrested Northrop employee was identified as Thomas Patrick Cavanagh of Downey, Calif., a Los Angeles suburb.

Mr. Cavanagh, who worked at Northrop's Advanced Systems Division here, was charged with the unauthorized removal of classified technical manuals, blueprints, drawings and a list of subcontractors. Mr. Smith said that Mr. Cavanagh had requested \$25,000 in cash for the documents.

If convicted, he could face life imprisonment.

Mr. Cavanagh was arrested by F.B.I. agents at 12:25 P.M. local time in the Commerce, a suburb of Los Angeles, according to John Hoos, an F.B.I. spokesman in Los Angeles.

Northrop officials here were silent on

the arrest. A spokesman, Maria Oharenko, said the company would have no comment other than that the F.B.I. had notified it of Mr. Cavanagh's arrest. She declined to say what Mr. Cavanagh's work at the company had entailed.

Warning to the Public

Justice Department officials praised the work of the F.B.I. in detecting the purported scheme. They issued a public warning of what they said was an increase in espionage activity aimed at threatening national security.

William H. Webster, Director of the F.B.I., who joined in making the announcement, said that after Mr. Cavanagh illegally removed the documents, he attempted "to contact and meet Soviet officials."

Bill Baker, assistant director of the

F.B.I. for Congressional and public affairs, said: "We were able to interject our own agents, posing as representatives of the U.S.S.R., before what could have been extensive damage was done. He turned over significant material, but to us, not to the Soviets."

"He was attempting to reach agents of the Soviet Union," Mr. Baker said. "He accepted \$25,000 in marked money and turned over the documents, at which time he was arrested."

Mr. Baker said Mr. Cavanagh had had credit difficulties. He said Mr. Cavanagh was not believed to have had accomplices.

'Secret' Clearance

Mr. Cavanagh had "secret" clearance, which corresponded to the material he turned over, officials said.

The term "stealth" has come to

stand for a variety of technologies, some old and some under development, for reducing the radar visibility of aircraft and other weapons.

Some techniques are as simple as smoothing out the shape of an airplane, that is, making jet engine inlets conform to a fuselage or wing instead of creating large structural bumps that would strongly reflect radar signals.

Other methods are more exotic, such as using fibrous materials that partly absorb radar signals or at least do not reflect them as vividly as metal. Electronic jamming of enemy radar also plays an important role.